

Proactively helping at work provides a 'high' for some, discouragement for others

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Employees who proactively help others at work can get a boost of motivation, but some individuals get discouraged from doing it again when their personal needs aren't fulfilled, according to new University at Buffalo School of Management research.

Available online ahead of publication in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, the study found that proactive helpers (people who provide assistance without being asked) are motivated to help again in the future when the interaction contributes to their sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. But negative interpersonal situations can occur when helpers don't understand the recipient's needs, making some people less likely help in the future.

"Employees who are highly skilled with [interpersonal relationships](#) can understand others' perspectives and show [emotional support](#) during the helping process, leading to better outcomes," says Min-Hsuan Tu, Ph.D., assistant professor of organization and human resources in the UB School of Management. "The competence level of the helper is what truly determines the consequences."

Using an experience sampling method (similar to a daily diary) the researchers analyzed nearly 1,500 responses from about 200 full-time [employees](#) across a variety of industries in Taiwan, where collectivism is a cultural norm. Workers maintain interpersonal harmony under the collectivist culture there, which makes it an ideal environment in which to test these theories.

The researchers say [managers](#) should provide a [work environment](#) that encourages proactive helping by defining work roles more broadly, by recognizing employees who help their coworkers and by implementing [interpersonal skills](#) training to help coworkers listen to each other and understand emotions.

"Managers should recognize that not all employees who are eager to help are actually capable helpers," says Tu. "While encouraging helping behavior is important, managers should guide the proactive helpers to recognize coworkers who really need help, which will benefit both the helpers and the recipients."

Their findings are particularly relevant to the trend of "quiet quitting," where employees only complete the minimal requirements of their work and are psychologically detached from their job—which accounts for 50% of the workforce, according to the study.

"To address this issue, employees with great interpersonal competence can proactively help quiet quitters and listen to their concerns," says Tu. "By doing so, quiet quitters are more likely to stay connected with other colleagues, which will help reduce this trend."

More information: Nai-Wen Chi et al, Why and when proactive helping does not lead to future help: The roles of psychological need satisfaction and interpersonal competence, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103824](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103824)

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